

Perspectives From a JTF Comptroller

by Captain Dan Sheesley

Hey, Capt Warbucks! What's our status? Resounding words from the Joint Task Force Shining Hope (JTF-SH) Deputy Commander, Brigadier General Samuel Helland, USMC, in reference to everything financial. Because every part of what we do in the military can be associated with a cost, the budget and finance questions abound from the JTF staff on a daily basis. The JTF-SH Commander, Major General William Hinton, USAF: How much has the Department of Defense spent to date on OPERATION SHINING HOPE—by service, by commodity? The JTF-SH Chief of Staff, Colonel Stuart Ehrlich, USAF: How much is refugee camp construction costing per day? The PSYOPS planner, SPC Hogg, USA: What's the correct way to fill out my travel voucher and who/where do I send it to? The number of daily issues and questions is far too long to list on the pages of this magazine. I've learned, as a JTF comptroller, you're always in demand and life is fast paced. The following paragraphs are valuable lessons learned—imperative to succeed as a JTF comptroller.

Do Research: The pace is fast, but don't cut corners! In the initial phase of standing up the JTF Headquarters, life proceeded at light speed. Fifteen-hour days were the norm and the taskings were numerous and varied. The J-4 directorate chief for logistics provided this simple analogy of tasking timelines: Short term suspense means, I need the answer last week, mid-term means I need the answer yesterday, and long term means, I need the answer by close of business! Not being too fond of lengthy staff summary sheets, with numerous attachments of background documentation, this get it done now mentality suited me perfectly. But it doesn't mean you can skip the basic steps of providing the commander with an educated, regulation-supported answer—and most importantly—your recommendation. What it does mean is do your research. Pull from every resource you can think of (your own experience or knowing where to find the answer), make time to ensure your answer(s) passes the logic test, and bring your proof with you when you brief/discuss the situation. Lesson Learned: Know your audience and your answer!

Be Flexible: Don't be a yes person, but don't be a nay sayer either! Both of these attitudes get old real fast, but this shouldn't be confused with not having a can-do attitude. The simple fact is there are things we can't do with operations and maintenance money. Commanders need to know what they can and can't spend money on and expect you to tell them. But when the request to purchase something comes in that's just not doable, be prepared to explain why and what the possible alternatives the commander has. Here is a classic example that seems to come up in every deployment and sure enough surfaced with this JTF. We received the O-6 signed purchase request for t-shirts with the get this bought immediately message attached—our fire for the day had started. After several action officers insisted he wants it done, so just do it, I went to the Chief of Staff. With regulations in hand (including all other regulations referenced in the main text), I calmly and systematically went through the reasons why it wasn't an authorized purchase with appropriated funds. But, before the meeting was over, I offered two thought-out solutions to the situation, provided my recommendation, and then let him decide on the course of action. In the end, the commander was well aware of what could and couldn't be done, he also had a recommended course of action, and within the hour we had t-shirts ordered—the right way. Lesson Learned: Tell the commander the facts, not what you think he wants to hear, and make a recommendation.

Be Decisive: You make the call! You will have many situations where you know the answer because you've dealt with it at home station or on some other deployment. But inevitably questions come up that there's no easy answer. It's okay to say I will have to research this and let you know by (give a time/date), BUT there's no room for I think we can do this. Remove I think and I believe from your vocabulary. These words are indecisive, and the perception will be that you don't know your business. This is the last thing you want to have happen. Once someone thinks you're unsure of yourself, the rest of your decisions will be questioned. Be prepared to use your knowledge at a moment's notice, and be sure of yourself. If you have absolutely no clue of the answer say so, but if you have an idea, make the decision, then make the decision right (being careful not to breach the lessons from the previous paragraph)! Here's one example: After a morning staff meeting, the J-4, Colonel

Dickerson, USMC, presented me with a transportation funding situation and asked me for three fiscally sound, on-the-spot courses of action, with pros and cons to each—and a recommendation. I had never dealt with this specific situation, but I used what information I did know and presented the possible courses of action. As a result, in less than two minutes he made the decision, and I had carte blanche to make the mission happen (within the regulations). Lesson Learned: Make an educated decision, then follow through!

Stay Involved: Know what's going on, and ensure you have your eyes on target. You must be intimately involved with the JTF's purpose for existence and what's going on. First, read the SITREP everyday. This contains a wealth of information on the current status of the operation and what the main issues of the day are going to be. Also, if there is a finance or budget issue in the report and you didn't read about it before the morning staff meeting, you better take cover—I think you get the picture. Second, every day read the previous couple of day's staff meeting notes you made even if they don't pertain to money. If it ends up involving money, you're already familiar with previous discussions and you're prepared to speak with authority. The final way to keep on top of things while at the headquarters is to maintain a detailed to do list. Read it at least twice a day and don't throw it away—even if everything is checked off. Having one list containing all the issues you've worked and still need to work is imperative to ensuring you don't miss anything. Rereading it keeps you in the loop and reminds you of who/what you owe answers to. Not throwing it away allows you to build continuity, relay lessons learned, and prevents you from working on the same question twice.

Seeing is believing is another critical part of knowing what's going on. This involves deploying to the forward location frequently. I purposely made a point to forward deploy for at least three days at a time, every ten days. Seeing your paying agents at ground zero enables you to do three key things:

1. Provide on-the-spot assistance and guidance. Many times the surge tempo is so quick the agents need a hand in implementing or enforcing new policies. So, while you are your there, meet and overcome those challenges for them. At the same time, you have also provided the necessary top-cover with senior staff or other J-cells, so your agents can focus on getting their job done.
 2. Review their funding document. Being able to go through their daily accountability, funding document, and Standard Form 44s first-hand pays big dividends. You learn the reasons why particular items were purchased. You get valuable background information on what we're spending taxpayer money on, and you then have a much better ability to brief the JTF/CC and MAJCOM/FM on the fiscal actions down-range.
 3. Touch and feel the challenges they face. About one month into the operation, the big question came up Why are finance people allowed to wear civilian clothes and leave the camp? Because I was there and had seen their downtown procurement operations (and its impact on the camp mission), I was able to talk to key leadership staff from a HQ JTF comptroller's standpoint. As a result, it was easy for me to explain the situation, overcome this challenge for them, and resolve the issue without further incident.
- Lesson Learned: Know the mission and get out of your office.

One thing for sure is if you think the Air Force Top Dollar contingency training is too far from reality; you're wrong, it only scratches the surface of the real thing. This has been a rewarding experience. My counterparts at RAF Mildenhall, Ramstein AB, and the HQ USAFE staff, provided outstanding support. I've learned how the other DoD services work and operate. I met the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and had the honor of meeting the President of the United States.

However, the one thing I will remember forever is being in Albania, watching the refugee bus show up. I saw an elderly woman get off the bus and walk with her husband, exhausted, both hands full with their only belongings. They were looking for their tent—the one with relatives from an earlier bus. At that point it didn't matter if I was a JTF comptroller, or how much money I was managing, I was someone who could help. We took the blankets from her and held her arm, carried their food and clothes, and took them to their tent. They were refugees, but they were human beings. With this simple act, more so than anything before, I now felt I had really contributed to Operation SHINING HOPE. The few minutes it took to help them means more to me than anything else I've done in this deployment; it was my biggest lesson learned. In more ways than one the need for military comptrollers in the Air Force and DoD, is more critical than ever. And there's no way it's just a desk job. (About the Author Continued on Pg 7)